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Hunting charms of the
Montagnais and the Mistassini

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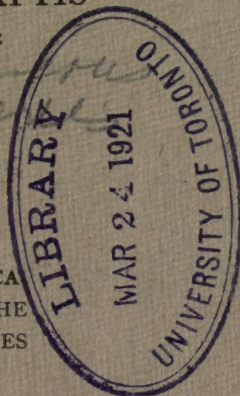
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INDIAN NOTES
AND MONOGRAPHS

EDITED BY F. W. HODGE



A SERIES OF PUBLICA
TIONS RELATING TO THE
AMERICAN ABORIGINES



HUNTING CHARMS OF THE
MONTAGNAIS AND THE
MISTASSINI

BY

FRANK G. SPECK

AND

GEORGE G. HEYE

NEW YORK

MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
HEYE FOUNDATION

1921

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PREFACE



THE specimens described herein and the notes pertaining to them were obtained by Dr Frank G. Speck, of the University of Pennsylvania, and Mr R. S. Speck, during a visit to Lake St John, Quebec, during the summer of 1920. Although a comprehensive collection of Montagnais and Mistassini ethnological objects was gathered, only five of the class of specimens known as *nimában* were obtained.

It is to be hoped that further investigations among these people by Dr Speck, in behalf of this Museum, will bring to light other facts regarding these interesting symbolic objects.

GEORGE G. HEYE,
Director.

HUNTING CHARMS OF THE MONTAGNAIS AND THE MISTASSINI

BY FRANK G. SPECK AND GEORGE G.
HEYER



IT IS impossible to categorize the *nimában* (the Montagnais name for this object) in exact terms. In general it is a prayer for game, a symbol of the hunter's body, his life, a symbol of the spirit which leads him to his game, a means of communicating with the shades of the animals, an object of ceremonial importance worn at dances performed by the hunter over the body of the slain animal. The *nimában* is probably more, but much remains to be learned by collecting more examples and ascertaining their individual significance.

The term *nimában* seems to signify "dance-cord," from *nimi-*, "dance," and the common Algonkian stem *-aban*, denoting "string," "length of something pliable," which occurs in cognitive forms throughout eastern dialects: compare, for example, Penobscot *-Abi* (*wə'ba'bi*, "wampum;" *agama'bi*, "snowshoe string;" *maksana'bi*, "moccasin string;" *wuskwá'bi*, "carrying strap"), and Malecite *-a'p'*, Micmac *-a'be*. Most of these tribes know the term *nimában* as a pack-strap, but its symbolic aspect is not emphasized as among the northern St Lawrence divisions of the group, so far as is now known.

Spread over an extremely wide range of country, the various bands of the sub-Arctic, semi-maritime hunters known in literature as the Montagnais ("mountaineers"), exhibit considerable variation in dialect and custom. From Hamilton river in eastern Labrador, following the coast of the Gulf of St Lawrence westward to the Saguenay, the Montagnais are seafarers and forest nomads according to season and fancy. There are two

dialects on this stretch, which covers a lineal distance of 800 miles and extends about 200 miles toward the interior of Labrador to the height of land dividing the St Lawrence waters from those of the Arctic. One dialect (*a*), spoken from Moisie river eastward, has phonetic and grammatical peculiarities akin to the Naskapi of the interior, and this is what is known as the Coast Naskapi, as the name was sanctioned years ago by Hind and other early travelers. From the Moisie westward to the Saguenay there is another—the more typical Montagnais (*b*).

(*a*) Includes the Montagnais of Moisie, Mingan, Romaine, Natashquan, St Augustine, Eskimo river, and Hamilton inlet on the coast, and possibly Nichicun lake and Waswanipi lake in the interior.

(*b*) Includes the Montagnais proper of Seven islands, Godbout, Bersimis, the Papinachois of Manicouagan river and lake, Escoumains, Tadousac, Chicoutimi, and the now extinct band of Murray bay.

In the interior, at Lake St John, the

dialect is related, but grades off toward the Mistassini and Cree.

Dialect, however, is no criterion of culture; accordingly there are variations in material culture, art, and mythology, which make substantial differences between the bands, necessitating the formation of groups into which they may be classified on the basis of both culture and dialect. A long and exhaustive survey and full collections will be made before these groups are finally determined, but at present the collections and information allow the Lake St John band, or Pikwagami, to be classed as one; the Chicoutimi, Tadousac, and Escoumains bands as another; the Bersimis as another, and so on eastward, band after band, the rest awaiting more attention before they can be grouped.

The three specimens of *nimában* described below are classified as the type of the Pikwagami ("Flat lake," Lake St John), an interior Montagnais culture intermediate between that of the coast and that of the eastern Naskapi and Mistassini.



The nimában shown in pl. I was used for a bear hunt, and is made of well-tanned moose-skin. In form it closely imitates a pack-strap, and in fact it symbolizes one. The wide part is bound on the upper edge with a red silk ribbon, and on the lower one with a similar ribbon of green. The scene is embroidered in red, yellow, and light-blue sewing silks. This magical object is worn by the hunter who has had a revelation about getting game in the future. He carries this decorated strap with him on the trail, and when, true to the revelation, he gets his game, he wraps it in this strap and brings it home. The hunter keeps the strap in secret, more or less, and does not show it lest it lose its power to function as a safeguard against starvation. The figures show trees on each end, the trail and canoe, the hunter with his axe, and the bear trying to cross to a lake which has a cross trail. When the hunter finds and kills the bear, he sits down near it and smokes. After having laid the bear out on its back with crossed

paws, he puts black tobacco in its mouth and places the nimában on its breast or about the neck. Sometimes before this is done the hunter places the nimában across his head, allowing the ends to fall over his shoulders. He then dances around the fallen game, at the same time singing, thus expressing the hope that he will have to utilize a pack-strap often in bringing back game, and voicing his joy at the success of his hunt.

The length of this specimen is $158\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and its extreme width at the embroidered part is $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches.

The next nimában (pl. II) is of tanned moose-skin, and was made by Napani, one of the oldest Montagnais hunters of the Lake St John band. He said he used this after returning from a hunt in which he was under necessity to avert famine. When the needed animal was killed, he put this nimában on his forehead, dancing around it once or twice singing, rejoicing for luck and success, and as a recompense to the spirit of the beast. This specimen, also, represents a pack-strap, and as in





the former one just described, symbolizes the desire to use a full-sized one in bringing home a quantity of meat. There are four tufts of red and black ribbons attached; the red ones represent small game, and the black ones bear. This specimen is 55 inches long and $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch at its widest point.

Pl. III illustrates an interesting nimá-ban, intended for a youth going on his first caribou hunt with his father; it was made for Awanic, son of Simon Rafael. This specimen also symbolizes a pack-strap, and is of soft-tanned caribou-skin. The broad part is bound with a lavender-colored cloth, attached to which are red and green silk ribbons, and a small piece of green ribbon is attached also to the narrow ends, but close to the wide part. The red ribbons signify small game, the green ones large game. The scene is embroidered in red, yellow, pink, and green sewing silk, and represents in the center the hunter on snowshoes in the act of shooting a caribou. Behind him is a tree on which is perched a loon;

while farther to the right is a lake containing figures of a duck and a beaver. On the left of the caribou figure is depicted another tree, and also a lake in which is the figure of a gull. The curved figures above and below both the "lakes" represent trails. This example is 71 inches long and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide.

Lake Mistassini is about 175 miles long and half as wide; it lies approximately 300 miles east of Hudson bay and 500 miles north of the St Lawrence. A small Hudson's Bay Company's post is situated there. For several hundred miles round about the people known as Mictaci'niwiuts ("Big Rock people"), forming a band of about 30 families, live and hunt. These Mistassini are very interesting; they are conservative, primitive, and live under great economic stress, being occasionally forced to choose between cannibalism or starvation. In dialect they form a group with the so-called Cree of Ruperts House on James bay, and to a certain extent with the Indians of Waswanipi. In culture this same group extends eastward to



and including the Naskapi. One might say of them: genus, *Naskapi*; species, *Mistassini*.

Part of this band was encountered trading at Lake St John, whence they had come some 400 to 700 miles from their hunting grounds to trade.

The nimában of the Mistassini are even more highly conventionalized than are those of the Montagnais, for they do not take the form of pack-straps, but are woven cords.

Pl. IV shows a large, white-tanned caribou-skin nimában of four strands, obtained from Mia'nckem. The nimában is Mia'nckem himself, the loop seen at the lower right-hand corner is his head, the loose end his legs. He explained the white coloring as symbolic of the caribou which he needed for his sustenance. The first ribbons symbolize: green, small game; dark-blue, bear; red wool, beaver; pink silk, lynx. In the middle the two strings of blue and white glass beads are the legs of the nimában, and symbolize caribou. The final pair of strings

of beads are the hind-legs of the nimában, and the loose string ends are the tails of the nimában and symbolize "trails of game." Mia'nckem said that he did not display his nimában often, because it weakened its power. He carried it in his game-pouch, and when approaching his victim often wound it about his shoulders. If he took small game, he tied the carcass in it and carried it suspended thus over his shoulders, the head of the nimában (the loop) cleated over a stick piercing the nostrils of the animal, like a toggle (resembling the Eskimo method of dragging home seals), the "tails" of the nimában tied to the animal's right hind-leg. In the case of large game, he left the carcass with his nimában stretched on the animal's chest, its head to the animal's head. Mia'nckem could sell the power of his nimában, but if he gave it away or lent it, it would not function.

The length of the nimában is proportionate to the age of the owner, and in this case is exactly 15 feet. Young men have small ones, which are replaced by



MISTASSINI NIMABAN

longer ones as they grow stronger and kill more animals.

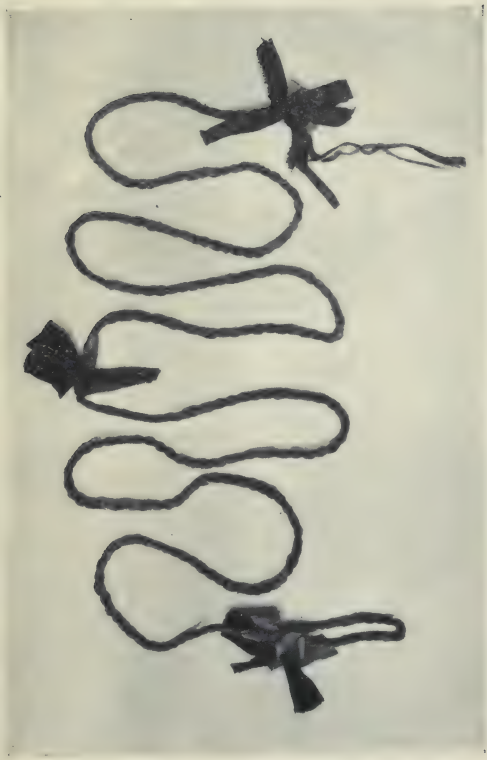
Mia'nckem is about forty years of age. There was more to learn from him regarding this specimen, but the absence of a competent interpreter prevented the obtaining of further information.

Pl. v shows a small, smoked, caribou-skin nimában belonging to Metowe'cic's son, who is about twelve years of age. His mother had made this for the boy, who was about to accompany his father on one of his first more serious hunts. The symbolism is as usual: a loop, the hunter's head; the tuft of ribbon and braid representing—blue ribbon, bear; red braid, beaver; and red silk, small game, these being the animals especially desired in this case. The boy is taught the individual symbolism by his father, and instructed in the ceremonial procedure when he has killed a beast.

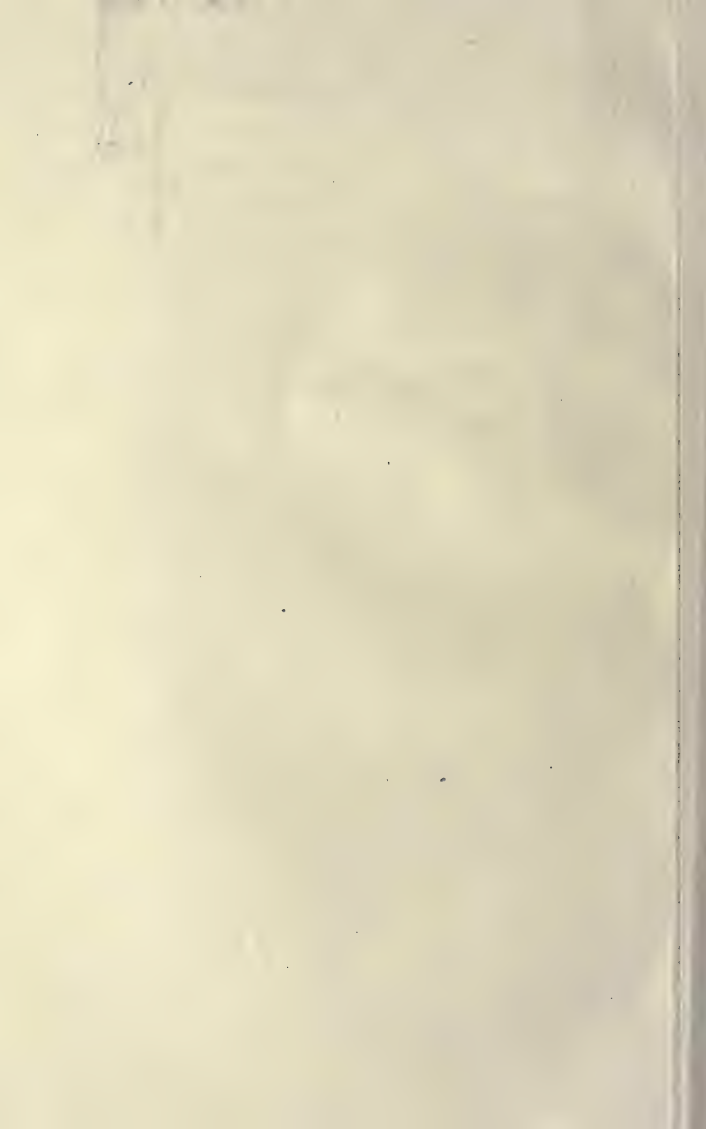
The tail is four-ply, and the two long pieces tie the whole string together for carrying purposes. When a beaver is killed, the hunter pierces the septum of

the animal's nose, inserts a stick as a cleat, puts the loop or "head" of the string about the cleat, and ties the two longest strings of the "tail" around the right hind-leg. He then smokes over the beaver and carries it home, slung over his shoulder on the nimában. If he should get a bear, being unable to carry it alone, he would smoke first, then leave his nimában on the bear's chest, rolling the animal on its back, the nimában doubled with its head toward the bear's head. When an animal has been left, to enable the hunter to return to camp for help, it is believed no beast of prey will eat the carcass while the nimában is resting on its chest. Possibly the man-smell on the nimában may be a safeguard.

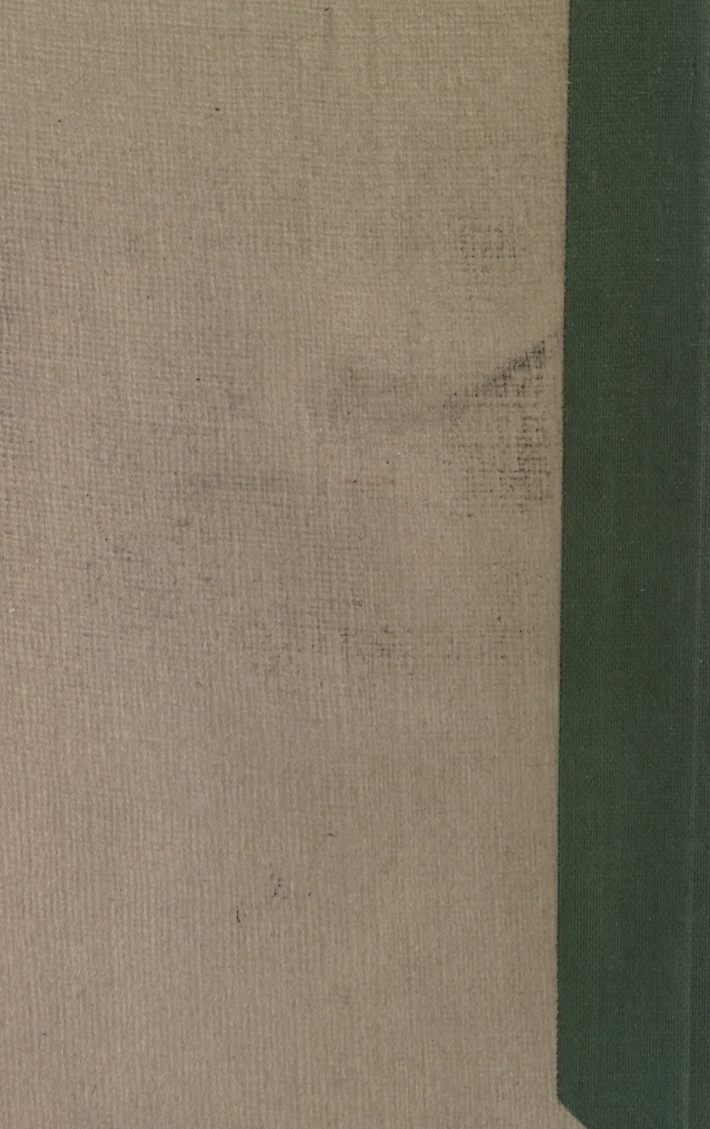
Every hunter owns and carries a nimában on his excursions and renews it from time to time according to some religious prompting. It is a very subjective article, and the symbolism seems to be somewhat individual. Several other like specimens, which unfortunately could not be obtained, were partly explained



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<p>by the Mistassini, but complete information regarding them was not available, as the hunters do not betray their secrets even to one another. The occasion for doing so seldom arises, as each man is his own ceremonial official and practises his rites when he is alone. Individualism of a generally similar type will be found to be the keynote to the ceremonialism of all the Algonkians of the eastern Canadian and Hudsonian zones.</p>	
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